

Views from the Pews: The Sea Chaplains

Priests have gone to sea as part of the ships company from well before the Royal Navy began. There is a record of Francis Drake ex-communicating his Chaplain for being the cause, as Drake saw it, of his ship running aground in the Pacific. But perhaps the earliest record of a religious leader afloat is of St Paul “breaking bread” and leading a service of thanksgiving after the storm off Malta (Acts 27).

Seagoing can be a hazardous affair. Sailors have always recognized a higher being as they sailed the world through storms and other hazards. The hymn “Eternal Father, strong to save” is known as the Naval Hymn. The last verse “O Trinity of love and power” is often sung kneeling as a prayer. Whilst the ships company do not object being fallen in for prayers few of them in modern times seem to practice their faith by regular attendance at Church. It was not until some years after the Second World War that compulsory church parades were stopped. Sunday morning afloat was taken up by the ship’s company falling in aft for Divisions and ashore marching to the Barracks Church.

In the days of big ships battleships and cruisers each had their own Chaplain. His cabin was the first one came to going aft to the Officer’s quarters so was easy of access by all the men aboard. Though they had to pass through or by the Royal Marines mess deck, or barracks as it was known. The Royal Marines traditionally were so positioned to protect the officers from the sailors!!

Unlike the other Services, Royal Navy Chaplains, though dressed as officers, wear no badges of rank, indeed in past days many wore a lounge suit. This makes it much easier for them to visit all messes and messdecks at any time or be able to walk with the CinC up the hill behind his home of an evening.

The Chaplain, of any denomination, is the person who contributes more than any other officer to the well-being and morale of the people. Whilst, of course, Chaplains do not pass on everything they hear from individuals it is important that they have a good relationship with the other officers, especially the Captain. The one person to have direct and unannounced access to the Captain or CO is the Chaplain. In the Royal Navy today all Chaplains work together though it was not until the mid 70s that all denominations started staying together on Church Parades.

Nowadays with the increased proportion of smaller ships the Chaplain has a more difficult task of moving around the several ships in the Squadron. Then there is the challenge of earning a Green Beret before appointment to a Royal Marine Commando.

The senior chaplain of each Service is appointed Archdeacon to the Archbishop of Canterbury and entitled to wear a red cassock. I was privileged to sponsor one new Chaplain of the Fleet at a brief ceremony at Lambeth Palace where he was installed as Archdeacon by the Archbishop.

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